A MAN MINE EQUAL

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BY

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THIS is a story of things as they are. If you are squeamish, or happen to be one of those persons who prefer to look upon the fair shiny surface of life, without ever caring to turn the pattern to judge whether the ugly threads of the warp and woof are staunch and firm or slippery and rotten, if the truths of life offend you, then this story is not for you.

I am not in any sense a story-teller, but no matter how tongue-

tied a man may be, if certain episodes come into his life, great waves of experiences that carry him high on their crests, his tongue is loosened and he tells his story. And in this way I am telling mine.

I must go back to a day in late November, fifteen years ago, for the beginning. I was at my desk cutting the edges of a budget of letters the afternoon mail had brought in,—straight business letters, cheery personal letters, whining letters from men who were down and getting the worst of it,— the usual run of mail with an occasional blue or yellow cheque sifting out of its envelope

to liven matters up. In the outer office I could see Carter's back bent over his books, his long legs wrapped round the high stool only releasing their grip as he moved to answer the insistent demands of the telephone. Back in the library under the lights a dozen men were reading the evening papers which had just come in, and the constant swinging of the outside door admitted draughts of frosty air charged with the first snowflakes, the rumble and roar of the elevated overhead, and more men, singly and in groups, pouring in from the great arteries of the city, who with nods of greeting, tramped

upstairs or downstairs or resolved themselves into other places in the rooms about, doubly warm and cheerful by contrast with the coming night.

It is strange how an incident and its setting can stand so silhouetted in a man's mind after so many years. A drawn game of checkers was just being concluded in the game-room, surrounded by an absorbed little knot of men. Upstairs a gathering of Grand Army men were renewing old times and warming up their blood with songs of the 60's which united oddly with the noise of a convention of railroad engineers which was breaking up in the

next room. Carter had wearily unwrapped his legs to respond to the telephone yet another time, when into this great hive of men's social and industrial activities was projected a strangely forlorn figure,—a boy, undersized for fourteen, pinched with cold and shivering in his buttonless coat, but with a look in his eyes and a something in his face that riveted my attention, reluctantly, indeed, but none the less firmly.

To know Joseph Buest as I then saw him for the first time I would digress from my story long enough to take you into one of Boston's narrow streets, into one of those tenement districts that

overflow with a crowding humanity; a humanity that, caught between the inexorable millstones of environment and heredity, plays its part in no different measure than perhaps might you or I had our lots in life been cast on the same stage.

In one of the squalid basements that peer upward into this squalid street there lived at that time a man named Martin Buest, a maker of shoes. He made good shoes when he was not drunk. It was his only excuse for living, for look as you might, not another virtue of craft or character had Martin Buest. He beat his wife in his lordly moods; he beat his

children impartially, not so much for given offense as for the upholding of the time-honored principle of parental authority; he starved and browbeat and intimidated them all; and at long intervals he made shoes.

Now though Martin Buest announced to the world in letters of charcoal on a pine shingle that his were high class goods for high class trade, either the high class trade of the street did not believe him, or else it preferred the alluring factory output of the downtown districts. So what with poor trade and more and more frequent intervals of drinking, the fortunes of the Buest family were

indeed at low ebb, till Mrs. Buest, in her own sober moments, took to the scrubbing of stores and the children scattered like deserted cats for a personal solution of the problem of holding soul and body together. Thus it was that Joe, the eldest, then about fourteen, came into the Wells Memorial Institute that evening in November and stood at my desk, the forlornest, raggedest, manliest, most sensitized little specimen of boyhood that ever grew in a human muck heap. But they were a man's eyes that looked at me; and behind them was a man's soul, asking, pleading, agonizing, demanding its human

birthright of cleanliness, respectability, opportunity, through the medium of work!

I never got a message straighter,—not from the boy's lips so much as from what his eyes told me. But I temporized by telling him we needed no office boy, which was true, and then began studying his face and watching the man's courage after a moment supplant the boy's despair. I noticed the involuntary grip of the hands (washed as clean as circumstances would permit), the tightening of a mouth that showed none of the usual sag which is the birthright of the slum child from a long line of ill-

conditioned forbears. He hesitated a moment, opened his mouth to speak, then, his judgment dominating his purpose, he was withdrawing quietly when I surprised myself by opening up a new line of industries and hiring him on the spot. I wanted a boy—well, for many things. His first errand was to take a note to my wife out in Brookline (we had the telephone) and next morning to anticipate my laundry man's weekly call by personally conducting my shirts to the laundry, a mile away. I had the conscience, of course, to pay him out of my own pocket while I held him in storage, as it were,

and it was a good investment almost from the very start. Inside of three weeks he was installed general office boy, and our troubles along this line were for a long time at an end.

The boy in his relations to his work was a marvel of faithfulness, alertness, willingness. That mollified me, but it was something more that attracted me. It was the steadfastness of purpose back of it all. He was old for his years — old as Methuselah — and his meager pay envelope was emptied entire every Saturday night into the wretched household chasm that yawned ever between the cruel precipices of

demand and supply. But with his first raise of wages he began putting the increase into our Workingmen's Savings Bank, wisely, I judged, refraining from mentioning the withholdings at home; and I knew then certainly what I had suspected before, that no accident of birth or circumstance could arrest this boy's moral growth toward higher things. Against the scale of poverty, slothfulness, ignorance, drunkenness, he was placing the ego of an individual soul, acknowledging no claims of past heritage, sweeping aside the circumstantial evidence of the present,—and the scale was beginning to move!

Our workingmen's classes were then, as they are now, a mighty force in helping up those who were striving to better prepare and strengthen themselves for the battle of life. Joe's education had terminated somewhere in the middle grades of the grammar school, and our Institute age restriction of eighteen years placed him outside the pale—apparently. Have you ever seen a hungry dog eyeing his master's table? Have you ever watched him lick up the crumbs fallen from the deserted board? That was Joe. He absorbed learning from the talk of the men, garnering it all in and threshing it out for him-

self afterwards; he studied it out between the janitor services he eagerly performed in their class rooms; he haunted their library and reading room; his ears were ever within hearing distance in all their debates. He grew and expanded at a tremendous pace; but always he was the faithful servant, never presuming upon his humble privileges, obedient, respectful, untiring; and one thing more—loving!

Perhaps you have already suspected it, and would smile at the incongruous friendship that had grown up between us, he a mere boy of the streets, I the business

manager of the Wells Memorial Institute of Boston, with my place in the world of men. I had been a married man ten years, but no children had come into our home. I would have adopted Joe without hesitation, but I felt instinctively I was too little to do it. He was not the boy who could be adopted. He was not content with lifting himself, God help him,—he was trying to lift the sodden creatures at home whom he called father and mother, the wayward pretty little sister, the rough brothers with whom he lived and slept and ate and shared, for whom he worked first and last with at least a par-

tial understanding of the fearful odds against him.

I had been to his home on one or two occasions, but the conditions there of drunkenness and wretched poverty so repelled me that, in spite of myself, I was obliged to become acquainted with the boy anew each time to reassure myself that fate had hurled a seed of promise into that rotton soil. In turn, my visits so shamed the boy that for days he could not raise his eyes to my face, and his usual frank manner became painfully constrained. But after thinking the matter over, deliberately, like a good surgeon, I began pressing

the wound. I spoke caustically of his brothers' evil street ways, of his father's irresponsible—and indeed criminal—attitude toward life. More delicately, of course, I hinted at the mother's weaknesses and discussed his sister's chances for the future. Slowly and painfully the boy's reticence gave way and he began to find comfort in talking to me.

* * * * *

The seasons had slipped away till I counted back six years that Joe had been with us. From office boy he had climbed into Carter's place on the tall stool,—Carter had gone out to Iowa to

farm,—and in this, as in the intermediate positions he had occupied, he was the same capable, hardworking fellow, with the same wistful look in his eyes and the same strong purpose in his young heart,—regeneration, complete regeneration,—not for himself alone but for his blood, for every member of his family, to the last. I knew these six years had brought some degree of physical comfort into the home, that one star of hope had risen and shone above the dark rim of the home horizon, and that was Joe. While the younger brothers did not care to emulate him, they respected him. The mother kept

the home in better condition, with a degree of cheerfulness. The sister loved him, for she knew almost her only words of kindness from his lips. The shoemaker began, over his cups, to allude boastfully to his eldest son and what paternal sacrifice had done for him,—a lie, if you will, but in it a meed of appreciation and a faint stirring of pride.

Joe worshipped his sister Martha, who was nineteen now, one year his junior; a vain, pretty little thing who shrank at her mother's voice and the shoemaker's blasphemies, and who, like other girls of her condition, was beginning to find the street world

attractive. She worked at a ribbon counter in one of the big stores on Washington Street and invariably her companions walked home with her as far as the street corner,— "the girls" or some of "the boys" of her acquaintance, and once the floor walker of her department. They said pleasant things to her; they praised her looks, sympathized with her troubles and joined in her laughter. Nobody was kind to her at home! She was met with abuse and even blows. They called her lazy and said she wasn't worth her salt and begrudged her things to wear! Her brothers were rough, dirty, noisy. Joey was a

dear, to be sure, but he was a boy, too, and couldn't understand.

She began out of working hours to seek the cheap substitutes for a happy girlhood,— ten-cent theatres, inane literature that held cheap romance ever before her eyes, the public dance halls. And then one day, when she was barely twenty, she ended it all by running away with a coarse middle-aged vaudeville actor who already had a family of a wife and several children.

It was then that Joe became a man at a single bound. He came to me pale and shaken and quite unable to discuss the matter except to say that he was leaving us.

His Martha,—his little sister,—whom he had hoped some day to place beyond discomfort and want! He must find her, of course, and he must earn more money to do it. The Institute had done everything for him,—it had given him education, strengthened his mind and purpose and advanced his earnings; but he must leave us now. He was taking a civil service examination for which the Institute had particularly fitted him, for the railway mail service. He would pass it,—there was no such word as fail,—and then he would find her! And this had opened his eyes to the future of the others.

They needed help now or it would be too late. He must have more money.

With my hand in his, and without speaking a word except "God bless you," I pledged him my help in it all,—the strong uplifting arm of the Institute and its opportunities for industrial and liberal education for his brothers as they came eighteen, a surveillance on the home, such aid as I could give in the finding of the sister. And he went from us.

It was uphill work I can tell you. The brothers were irregularly at work and in the intervals were disposed, young as they were, to seek the downward path.

The shoemaker sank daily deeper in his cups. But in the mother, weak creature though she was, there seemed to begin a slow birth of better things through the pain of her daughter's fate. With the awful uncertainty of it her mother heart stirred to life, and now drowned in tears, now accusing herself with bitterness and self-reproach, sobered and penitent, she became a strengthened tie which held the household together.

* * * * *

That is old Martin sitting there playing checkers in our smoking room, a place where our old men

love to congregate. But he has a right to be there, mind you; no bums or idlers around here, or drunkards either. Every man among them earns or has earned the right to be there through the honest title of workingman; and Martin still makes good shoes, in spite of his age and rheumatism, and lets liquor alone. But I am anticipating my story.

Joe passed his civil service examination and got a railway postal clerkship almost at once. After that I saw him but once a week, Saturday afternoons. He was only twenty-one then, but he looked much older, and gray threads were beginning to show

in his dark hair. I learned to watch the hands of the office clock for the hour that heralded his coming, sure that the door would open almost on the minute, and his serious face, lighted for the moment with the joy of seeing me, would look in. Close upon that expression always followed that other, inquiry and suspense. Had I heard anything—of her? And always I had to shake my head, looking hopeful, however, not to discourage the boy too much. I was doing what I could to assist in the search for his sake, but I was not sure it was best that he should find her.

The time of which I write is

now back years in the past, and the pattern of the weaving from the loom of life is before me, its strength and worth to be judged by the Great Inspector. Yet as I turn the pattern now, I marvel at its strength and evenness, for here I know the knots were hastily made and gave way, there the thread snapped, and that pulled corner was where the workman looked away from the shuttle in the weaving. But the troublous stitches fade more and more as I look at the pattern.

I have already told you that the shoemaker was a hideous misfit in life in everything except the making of shoes. It was

plain, therefore, he must make shoes. His whole existence, air, food, light, prayer itself for him, must be through shoe leather; in this alone could he express worthiness. So Joe drew his boyhood savings from the bank and moved the family into a better home with a clean little shop for his father, in a better part of the city. Into the shop he put good tools and enough good leather to save half a dozen drunkards' souls. Then he put his father down on the bench and talked to him as one man to another. He told him what he was in no uncertain terms, and with a bitterness of truth that admitted no dispute.

He showed him what he might be. He gave him his chance, as far as he, the son, was concerned. And when the revelations were finished the shoemaker was — afraid.

This is not a story of miracles, but of facts, and Martin Buest continued to drink. But through an ever growing fear and respect for his son, and because of the good shoe leather, the intervals between his total lapses grew longer, and as the Demon with the Red Eyes retreated step by step, we hastily seized the vantage ground and planted our victorious banners in the name of Shoes! Shoes, shoes, shoes! They filled

his days and haunted his dreams; they pursued his moments of weakness and perched around him in rows like black birds of ill omen when he fell. I, myself, had a pair a month while trade was picking up and bound him to finish them in half the time it required. The first customers were of our finding and they drove him with whip and spur. And then school children began to troop in for repairs, assuring him, with truth, that school must wait on those shoes. Talk about your gospel of salvation through fasting and prayer! The gospel that drove Martin Buest, hardened sinner that he was, with a

flaming sword, was the universal gospel of work, — hard work, more work always than he could do! And because he was a born workman, and shoemaking with him was an art, he did it and was saved.

The boys, Joe's brothers, were as great a problem in their way, for they had the strength and unsatiated appetites of youth without the balance either of inherent morality or education. Two were working in a foundry and another in a plumber's shop, where they were fairly faithful. But whatever of dissipation they gave their nights to, there was one night in the week when they took pains to

be sober and self-respecting citizens, and that was Saturday night, when Joe was in town. One by one, however, as they came eighteen, under our pressure they were rounded into the Institute, where the contact with better men, and our night classes, helped them up the ladder and made of them respectable young workingmen.

And with things growing a little easier at my end of the line, Joe was searching up and down the earth for his sister. It was about this time that in response to a great need we had let down the bars and admitted women into our Institute, with educational and

vocational classes for them, dressmaking, millinery, cooking and the like; the social evenings, too, were very popular from the first. On a night when Joe would chance to be off his run he would sit in the corner looking moodily at the dancing or whatever it might happen to be, and I knew the thoughts in his mind as well as if he had spoken them aloud. If this had but been in time, it might have saved his little sister! If she could but have had the protection and privileges of such a place before her untried feet had wandered into the treacherous paths! The pity of it,—O God, the tragedy of it,—that it

had come too late for her! But I knew, too, that though the past was bitter, his heart was tender, and in her memory he was using his influence for the work we were doing and giving liberally of his money to aid our growing needs.

But if he was thinking only of his sister, there was many a bright eye there that looked with interest on him, and I couldn't help wishing he would fancy one of our fine girls and marry. There was one in particular, Mary Lowe, to whom I introduced him with that very hope in my heart. Mary was as uncommon as the Kohinoor diamond, and, like it,

she needed no setting; she was enough in herself. I could imagine her Joe's wife in a four-room cottage, doing his mending and getting the meals, or gracing a Back Bay mansion, with Joe a millionaire; the setting made no difference. She would always be just Mary.

Nobody ever thought to inquire who she was. She carried her passports with her, in looks and gentle sweetness and intelligence. More than once I had seen her soft dark eyes turned in Joe's direction, though modestly withdrawn the next moment, and it seemed like love at first sight with both of them. But Joe

fought the thing stubbornly, and Mary's manner was often pained and hurt, though she bore it bravely.

I took Joe to task for his aloofness. He was quiet for a while under it and then broke out:

"Don't you suppose I know the girl loves me? And I love her, God help me! But I can't ask any girl to marry me till I know certainly that other one is not suffering in shame and want. I must find her or know that she is dead before I offer any other woman protection and a home."

So that was it! Knowing him even as well as I did, I had not

plumbed the nobility of his soul to its depths.

* * * * *

And then one day he found her and the suspense and sorrow were ended. He heard of her way out on the Pacific Coast where she had been thrown on the town from a house of ill repute, friendless, alone and ready to die. With her hands in his she sobbed out the story:

"Oh Joey, it's so good of you not to hate me! He left me and I couldn't go back. I couldn't have got work, and father and mother would have been so terrible, you can see how it was,—

and things went so badly with me—I suffered so. Don't leave me, Joey, will you? Perhaps you'll take me home with you and they'll forgive me — even now."

He brought her home (though the doctors said she might die on the way) to the chastened mother, and through the force of his will alone, I believe, she lived, and in the end found happiness and peace.

On the list of the Board of Management of the Wells Memorial Institute, which is counted a mighty regenerative force in the problems of men's affairs and

was "bequeathed to Boston by those who had faith in God and so in men," we read two names with pride. They are those of Joseph Buest and his wife, who was Mary Lowe.

And in the large measure of their prosperity, they labor to help others.

NOTE.—The author of this sketch has taken facts and made of them a composite story, with such license as may be allowed a story writer.

Bishop Phillips Brooks, Boston's loved divine, said:

"The battle that is to be fought out in Wells Memorial the Master made plain to us when He bade us think of those things that are to be cultivated here; when He

bade us remember that in sobriety, intelligence, industry, skill and thrift there lay the great salvation of the workingman; when He told us the enemies of the workingman were intemperance, unskillfulness, the willingness to do things in a poor, meager, shambling way instead of doing them in the best and finest way in which they can be done.

"There is another enemy that strikes at the vitals of the workingman: the dark brooding care, the absence of cheerfulness, the fastening on their minds of discontent. Against this enemy this Club, too, sets its face.

"WE BELIEVE THAT GOD WILL RAISE UP MEN TO DO THE WORK, BECAUSE HE HAS CALLED MEN AND SET THEM INTO THE FRONT OF THIS WORK WHICH IS MIGHTY AGAINST THE MULTITUDINOUS VICES OF THE CITY.

"We are thankful that there was in our time faith and hope enough in men and in God to start an institution such as this."

To the Reader:

We are sending you this little story believing that you will feel the ring of its truths and realize anew the necessity of such a work as ours in this city of Boston as well as the ever urgent necessity of money to carry it on. Will you express your sympathy in a way that will encourage us as we labor, enlarge the work or perpetuate it for the future, as your privileges and sympathies may suggest? Checks may be made out to — Superintendent, Wells Memorial Institute—nine hundred eighty-five Washington Street, Boston, Massachusetts.

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